DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 017 UD 030 957

AUTHOR	Schwartz, Wendy
TITLE	Will a Focus School Meet the Needs of Your Child? For Parents/about Parents.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	[95]
CONTRACT	RR93002016
NOTE	5p.; Based on "Selecting the Focus of a Focus School," a digest published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. For related documents, see UD 030 946-958.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Child Development; Critical Thinking; Curriculum; *Decision Making; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Magnet Schools; Needs Assessment; Nontraditional Education; *Parent Role; *School Choice; *Teaching Methods; Thematic Approach

ABSTRACT

Most large schools have many types of programs serving many types of students, but smaller schools, serving fewer students, may be able to have a more defined "personality," or focus. Focus schools are becoming more popular because their students tend to be high achievers and because many districts are allowing families to choose the schools they want their children to attend. This guide helps parents understand the different types of schools and discusses the benefits and drawbacks of each. Magnet schools, or theme schools, have a single curriculum focus, even though they teach the basics in all subjects. The special emphasis of a magnet school may appeal to particular students, but it is important to be sure that the theme affects all areas of schooling. Schools with an instructional focus are distinguished by an instructional method that guides all aspects of the school's operation. The method usually emphasizes developing students' critical thinking skills. The focus of some schools is how they approach all aspects of education. Their particular orientation, or philosophy, governs and unifies school activities. Before enrolling a child in a focus school with a philosophy, parents should consider whether their children will be committed to the philosophy and do well in a program based on it. Parents should also be committed to the philosophy and be willing to do the work that the school asks. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC

ED 396 017

for parents/about parents

WILL A FOCUS SCHOOL MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUR CHILD?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SP 030957

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Most large schools have many types of programs and serve many children with a wide variety of education needs. Smaller schools, serving fewer students, are able to have a more defined "personality," or focus. These focus schools are getting more popular because their students tend to be high achievers. Also, many cities and school districts are allowing families to choose which schools they want their children to attend. Therefore, schools are trying harder to be different from each other, and to show why one school may be a better choice for a particular child than another.

Focus schools may differ from each other in their student populations, programs and individual courses, and even in the way they teach. Focus schools are alike because they are all organized around a common idea or concept that they believe will best help students learn.

The discussion below will help parents understand the different types of schools that call themselves focus schools, and the benefits and drawbacks of each. It can help parents decide whether to enroll their children in a focus school.

Magnet or Theme Schools

Magnet schools have a single curriculum focus, called a theme, even though they teach the basics in all academic areas. They emphasize a single subject or area of learning, such as science, the humanities, or multiculturalism. They may even use examples from the theme subject when teaching other core subjects. In addition, the theme may be broad enough to govern teaching methods, schedules, and extracurricular activities.

One popular type of theme school is the career magnet. Its curriculum gives students an education that will help them

find employment in a specific industry or job area. Some career magnets form partnerships with businesses in the community so that students can have the opportunity to work at jobs in the career area that they are still learning about. Students may even be taught by professionals from those businesses. Examples include schools that teach about aviation, journalism, and technology.

Because theme schools bring together students who share an interest, they tend to have a school population of mixed academic ability, English language skills, and ethnic and social background. Such a mixed group can promote learning for everyone, and foster a sense of shared commitment and responsibility. Most important, experience has shown that students particularly interested in the school's curriculum are likely to work harder and show greater achievement.

Many education experts believe that magnet schools which provide the best education are the ones that offer the most courses related to the theme and allow the theme to affect all areas of schooling. Some magnet schools, however, use their theme in only a few unrelated courses, and, therefore, don't provide students with many more benefits than do regular schools. So it is important to find out not only what a school's theme is, but how the theme is used.

Another possible problem with magnet schools is their admissions policy, because some may want to enroll only students with the best records. While there have been some court cases limiting schools' ability to discriminate against certain students, it is still necessary to find out what a school's admission criteria are, and to question them if they seem unfair.

Schools with an Instructional Focus

Another type of focus school gets its personality from the way that teachers teach (called "instructional method"). All the courses are taught using the same method. Usually, the method emphasizes developing students' critical thinking skills as they learn course content at the same time. The instructional method guides all aspects of the school's operation. It can provide students with a shared sense of purpose and commitment, and help keep their attention.

An example of a school with an instructional focus is one in New York City, which requires students to apply five basic questions to each area of study. Through answering the questions, the students learn all they need to know about the subject they are studying, and also learn how to think critically about it.

While magnet schools, described above, may seem more special, because their theme can be easily seen, schools whose focus is a particular type of instruction can also be very effective—particularly if the type of instruction meshes well with a student's learning style. In addition, schools with a single instructional focus tend to require more of students academically than do schools using many different teaching methods.

It is important to find out as much as possible about a school's instructional focus when considering whether a particular child will do well there. Different students have different learning styles and educational needs. So, some instructional methods may work better with some students than others. Also, some students may be more successful in a school where several different methods are used.

Schools with a "Philosophy"

The focus of some schools is how they approach all aspects of education: course content, extracurricular projects, instruction, and educational goals. They have a particular orientation or "philosophy," often consisting of a set of assumptions or values, which governs and unifies school operations. The philosophy attracts certain students and their families, and school staff, who all share it, will be motivated by it to do good work, and will promote it.

One example of a focus school with a philosophy is a school that requires a great deal of parent participation. The school assumes that parents are willing to get very involved in their children's education and the functioning of the school. Other examples are charter schools. They are created by a group of parents based on their beliefs about the best type of school organization, instructional methods, and curricula, and are publicly funded. Parochial schools are also schools based on a philosophy, but, because they are private schools, parents must pay to have their children attend them.

A benefit of focus schools with a philosophy is that all the people associated with the school are loyal to it and feel comfortable working with each other. They are more likely to try harder to make the education provided by the school effective and valuable. For students, this means that they will try harder to achieve academically. Also, since life in cities can seem fragmented and lonely, schools with a philosophy can provide students and their families with a community of support.

Before enrolling a child in a focus school with a philosophy, parents should consider whether their children will be committed to the philosophy and do well academically in a program based on it. Parents should also be committed to the philosophy, and be willing to do the work that the school requires of them.

This guide, written by Wendy Schwartz, is based on **Selecting the Focus of a Focus School**, *a digest published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a copy of the digest and a list of other Clearinghouse publications.*

This publication was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002016. The opinions in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You can reach the NPIN World Wide Web at http://ericps.ed.uiuc, or the NPIN Gopher at gopher://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
800/601-4868
Fax: 212/678-4012
Internet: eric-cue@columbia.edu